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Robots Guide to Ethical Marketing

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Robots Guide to Ethical Marketing

The 2005 animated film *Robots* captivated audiences by telling the story of Rodney Copperbottom, a small-town inventor turned world-changer. Rodney's journey from growing up in quiet Rivet Town to fighting for change in bustling Robot City illustrates the film's most obvious message, that everyone should tenaciously pursue their dreams. While this message is valuable, the film makes other significant claims about the real world. Most notably, the movie comments on the ethics of a prevalent real-world approach to marketing, which the movie embodies with the slogan "why be you when you can be new?" Rodney spends his time in Robot City battling against profit-hungry reformers trying to change the way that Bigweld Industries does business. *Robots* condemns corporations whose marketing claims that the personhood of consumers relies on the consumption of their product.

Robots demonizes characters who advocate for marketing strategies that tie personhood to the ownership of a product and glorifies those who do not. Rodney's heroic status is earned by his fight against Ratchet's attempt to force robots to rely on his product. Ratchet is portrayed as evil from the start when he holds a board meeting introducing his slogan "Why be you when you can be new?" As a board member disagrees with him, he dramatically ejects her from the building with a bout of evil laughter. Audience distaste for him only grows as the movie continues to portray him as a classic villain. His shiny "upgraded" body is a nod to his fake being. His reliance on his mother furthers audience perception of him as spineless. His mother, Madame Gasket, is depicted as evil by her rusty, dirty appearance and hostile treatment of employees. The audience first sees her feigning generosity by giving her workers a two-second break time. This mother-son duo, the masterminds behind the evil marketing scheme, are portrayed as the least likeable characters in the movie. Conversely, Rodney's dad and "outmode" friends are glorified for their positive outlook, even in dire circumstances. Herb is portrayed as a consistently hardworking and supporting husband and father. Throughout Rodney's childhood, Herb encourages him to follow his dreams by supporting his tinkering, even when it goes awry.

Fender and Piper share what little they have with Rodney to make his trip to the big city more comfortable. The film portrays Rodney and the rest of the “good guys” as victimized by Ratchet, further demonizing Ratchet as a corporate leach.

Bigweld, the primary dynamic character throughout the movie, is most glorified when fighting against Ratchet’s greedy scheme. Early in the movie, the audience sees Bigweld as an inspiration to robots everywhere. His introduction occurs as a float of his figure whizzes by Rodney and his father at a parade. Herb tells his son that Bigweld is “the greatest robot in the world”, explaining that he invents things that make everyone’s life better. Bigweld is glorified as the head of a company who relies on their customers to flourish. His slogan of “You can shine no matter what you’re made of” resonates with many robots, including Rodney. Later, when Rodney travels to meet Bigweld in Robot City, Bigweld is taken off his pedestal when he ignores Rodney’s plea for help. His likeability is at an all-time low until he agrees to help Rodney several scenes later. Bigweld’s change of heart comes after realizing that Ratchet’s actions are wrong and need to be fought. By glorying Bigweld when he is most opposed to Ratchet’s approach to business, the movie takes a clear stance in opposition of a company trying to convince customers that they are less if they do not purchase the company’s product.

Ratchet’s marketing strategy hurts business by alienating two large groups of customers—those who cannot afford the product and those who resent the company’s willing devaluation of non-customers. The movie opposes Ratchet’s approach by exaggerating one of its major shortcomings; it inherently turns off customers. People who cannot afford to purchase the product feel devalued without any control over it. Fender, Piper, and the other outmodes embody this demographic in the movie. Purchasing Ratchet’s upgrades is not an option for them, so they resent being belittled for something outside of their control. A different group of potential customers resent a company telling consumers that they need the company’s product on ethical grounds and will boycott that company. Cappy, a clearly well-off board member of Bigweld industries helps Rodney and friends fight Ratchet in hopes of protecting the world from his deception. Losing this group of consumers is potentially more painful for the company because they actually had the means to purchase the product. The movie represents Ratchet’s strategy as raising profits per sale slightly, but significantly decreasing the number of sales and therefore hurting revenue.

Robots demonstrates that a company can flourish without unethical marketing strategies by displaying the success of Bigweld Industries’ positive business mantra “You can shine no matter what you’re made of.” This approach clearly contrasts Ratchet’s marketing that relies on

the insecurity and devaluation of the customer. The movie depicts two versions of Bigweld Industries, one that prioritizes the customer, promoting self-worth, and another that prioritizes profits over people. While the latter approach is clearly condemned, the former is portrayed as a viable alternative. Bigweld's notoriety as a Walt Disney-like character would be impossible without his company being successful first. Bigweld's notoriety is reiterated throughout the movie, first through his parade float and later through his starring TV role. The movie highlights the loyalty that his customers feel towards him and Bigweld Industries, a rare but desirable spot for a company to be in. The movie highlights Bigweld Industries effectiveness at reaching nearly all demographics. Literally every robot in the movie outside of Ratchet and his mother supports Bigweld's customer-first business model. The movie glorifies this model by portraying a smaller-profit, higher volume approach as equally or more profitable than Ratchet's plan to receive greater profit from a select few.

The movie exposes the lie behind Ratchet's marketing scheme in a single scene. Near the end of the movie, Rodney and his outmode friends are gathered in Madame Gasket's Chop Shop to fight Ratchet and his army. As the battle nears its end, it is increasingly clear that Rodney will be victorious. As this happens, Ratchet is shown as increasingly weak and timid. He is laughably spooked several times by plungers whizzing by or fallen comrades. This character transformation reaches its climax as he is snared in a web of chains and his shiny upgrades clatter to the floor. He is left dangling helplessly, and deflates with a cry of "Aah, my upgrades." It is very evident that he perceived his worth as tied to his upgrades and appearance, but at the end, they were worthless and could not save him. In contrast, it is this very moment that gives Rodney and his friends victory, clearly juxtaposing the world views of these characters.

The claim that *Robots* makes about business is directly translatable to the real world. Many of the most powerful companies today take Ratchet's approach to marketing in their advertisements. Television commercials and radio ads often attempt to convince consumers that their state of being is dependent on purchasing the company's product. While this strategy is common in nearly every sector, it's especially glaring in make-up marketing. Maybelline poses the question "Maybe she's born with it, maybe it's Maybelline," directly implying that their product is needed to supplement a woman's natural appearance. While many see through these ads, others buy into their message, as indicated by the longevity of the strategy. This marketing approach does not align with a Biblical worldview. Companies who use this tactic are attempting to portray their products as a savior. This paves the way for idolatry and is clearly not a Biblical

approach to marketing. *Robots* and the Bible agree, companies should rely on their customers, not vice versa.